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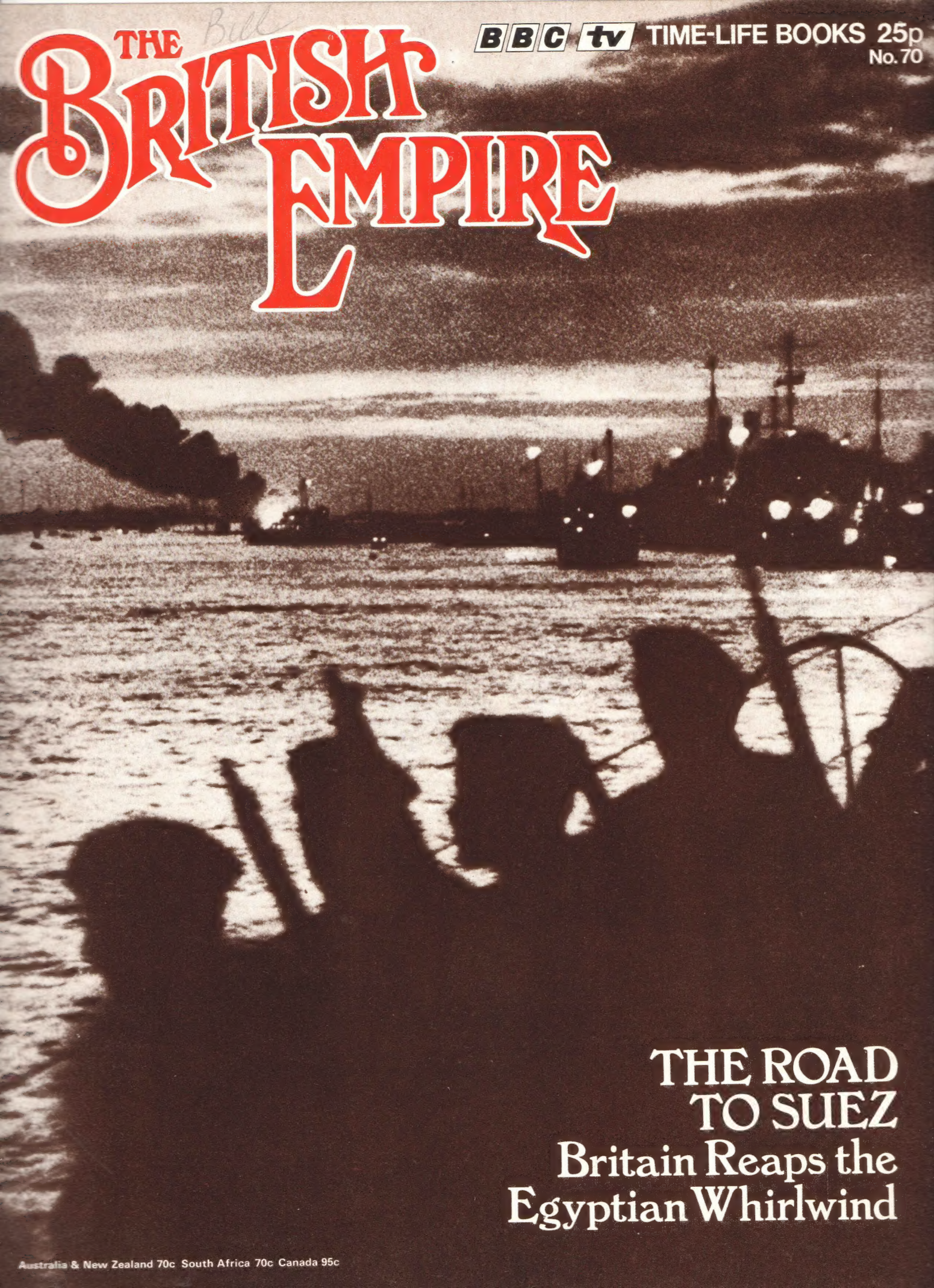

THE ROAD TO SUEZ
Britain Reaps the Egyptian Whirlwind

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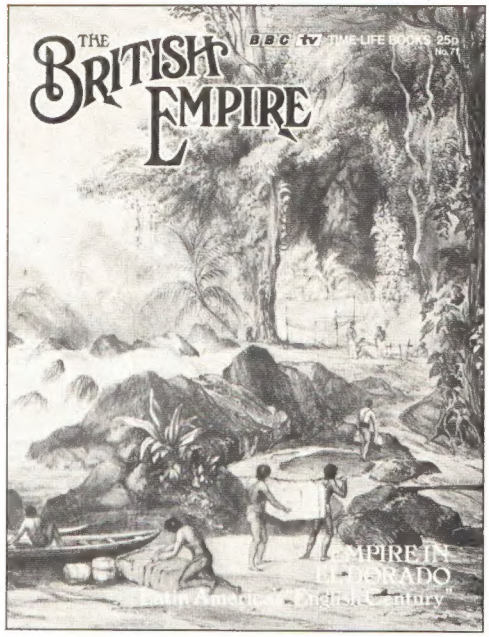

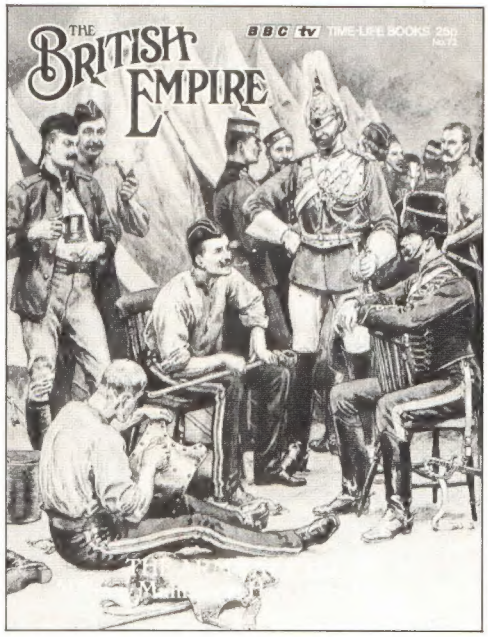

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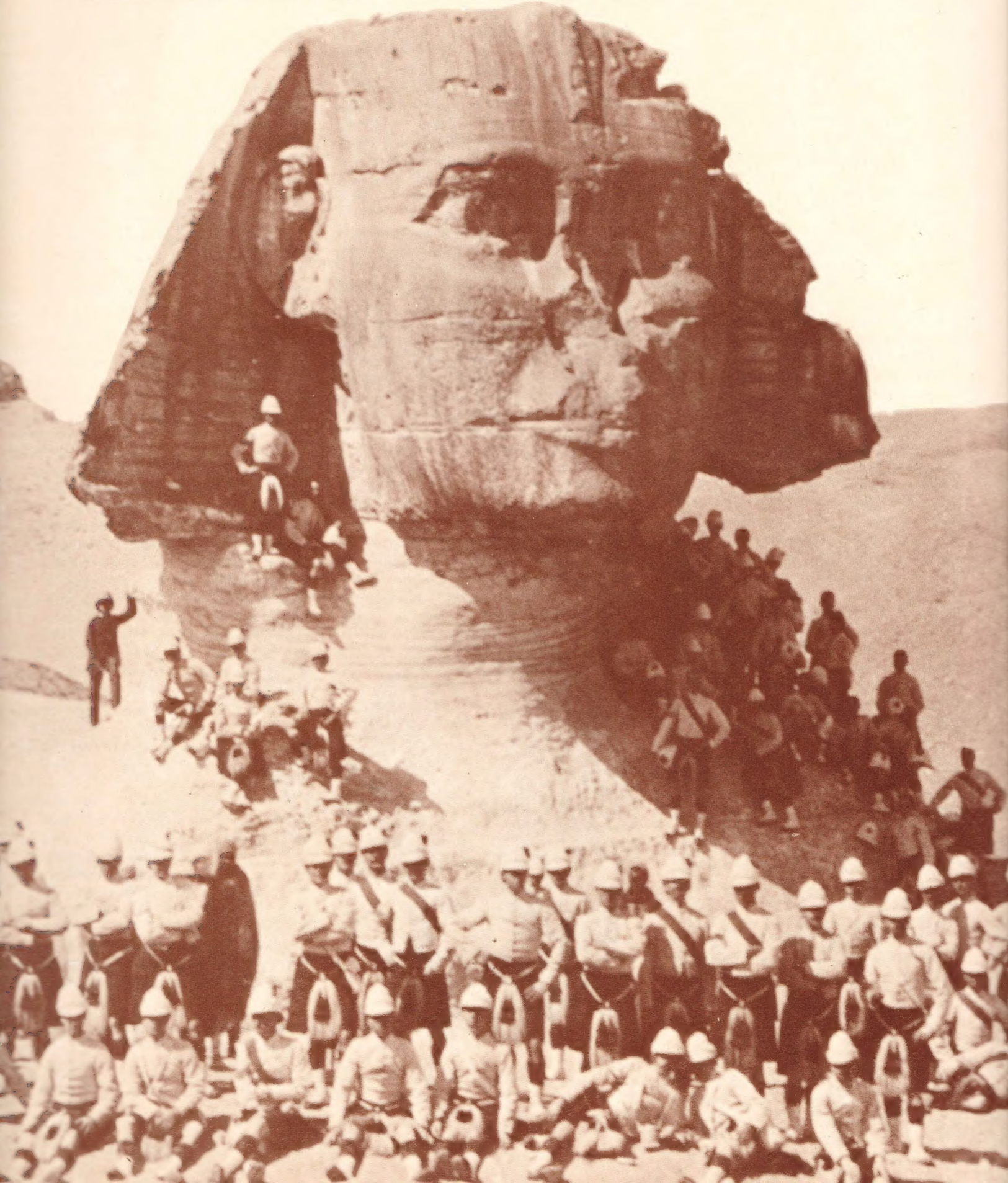
THE ROAD TO SUEZ

After Britain's defeat of Egypt in 1882, jubilant Highlanders posed on the Sphinx (below), a symbol of British success in protecting the Suez route to India from the threat of Egyptian nationalist revolt. Nationalist sentiment was not suppressed, but only in 1956 were the last remnants of imperial authority over the Suez canal humiliatingly swept away by Egypt's greatest nationalist – Gamal Abdel Nasser



by Peter Mansfield

In 1900, Lord Cromer, the magisterial occupant of the British Agency in Cairo, had cause to be pleased with the shape of events. In the 17 years during which he had held power, the country had been transformed. The Egypt that he had found when he arrived in the summer of 1883 – one year after British troops had landed to crush Colonel Arabi's national revolt at the Battle of Tel-el-Kebir – was sullen, miserable and loaded with debt. Soon after his arrival a series of military disasters in Egypt's quasi-empire in the Sudan had led to the triumph of the Mahdi, the Sudanese Muslim "Messiah," and the death of the brave but eccentric General Gordon in Khartoum.

By means of ruthless economies in every government department, Egypt's financial credit had been restored and foreign capital was once again pouring into the country. British irrigation engineers, headed by a Scotsman of genius, Colin Scott-Moncrieff, had repaired and extended the ruined dams and irrigation canals. In 1900 the great Aswan Dam, an engineering wonder until it was overshadowed by the High Dam built some miles upstream 60 years later, was nearing completion.

Cotton output and exports had greatly increased. The efficiency and honesty of all government departments had been improved by the introduction of upright, salaried British officials. The burden of taxation on the peasants had been lightened and the use of the whip and forced labour drastically reduced. The police and the army had been reorganized and retrained so that by 1898 the methodical young Sirdar (i.e. Commander) of the Egyptian Army, Sir Herbert Kitchener, could defeat the Mahdist forces at the Battle of Omdurman. Cromer himself had devised the unorthodox formula whereby Sudan became an Anglo-Egyptian Condominium with the Union Jack and the Egyptian flag flying side by side over the Governor-General's palace in Khartoum. Nominally, Britain and Egypt enjoyed equal sovereignty; in fact, Britain held the real power in the Sudan as it did in Egypt.

It was an odd situation. For both constitutional and political reasons, Egypt was most unlikely to become part of the Empire. Theoretically, Egypt was still part of the Ottoman Empire with the Khedive as the hereditary Viceroy ruling on behalf of the Sultan in Constantinople. And other European Powers, who had many long-standing rights and privileges in Egypt, had watched Britain occupy the country with a mixture of envy and resentment and were determined that Britain should not annex Egypt or threaten their privileges. These privileges, granted by the Ottoman Sultan and known as Capitulations, were quite extensive: they included the right to exemption from Egyptian taxation and the right to trial in their own consular courts. Also, since 1880, the Powers had effective control over Egypt's budget.

The home government did not want to take on more imperial responsibilities. Liberals and Conservatives alike were anxious to withdraw from Egypt. But they could only do so if it was secure; it never was – there remained a permanent danger of a national movement seizing control of this vital link with Britain's Indian Empire. The British could neither relinquish control, nor seize it outright. The result was the system known as a "Veiled Protectorate": instead of Cromer ruling directly as Governor or High Commissioner, he did so from behind a screen of Egyptian ministers and with a title no more exalted than that of British Agent and Consul-General.

From time to time British ministers would repeat the assurances first made by Gladstone in 1882 that Britain did not contemplate an indefinite occupation of Egypt. (One estimate is that the promise of an early withdrawal was made 72 times between 1882 and 1907.)

But gradually British control became more imperial. There was always some good reason why the withdrawal had to be postponed, and the one that was most commonly put forward was that the Egyptians had not yet proved capable of governing themselves. The trouble with this excuse was that over the years it became self-generating. Because Egyptian ministers had no real power they had no opportunity to show that they were capable of governing Egypt. And as the years passed Cromer's experience in Egypt gave him such authority that his judgement on Egyptian matters was nearly always accepted in Whitehall. He became a Viceroy in all but name.

In the first years of his rule, Cromer's task was made easier by having to deal with the colourless and unassertive Khedive Tewfik, who owed his throne to Britain and was quite prepared to act as a puppet. All the key government departments had British "advisers" who held the real power. For much of the period, Tewfik kept as Prime Minister Nubar Pasha, a wily Armenian Christian who, while feeling some genuine loyalty to Egypt, had a lively awareness of the extent of British power. When he was discussing with Scott-Moncrieff the question of appointing a Minister of Public Works, Nubar insisted that he should be an Egyptian but he added: "Do you want an able man or a nonentity?" "A nonentity, please, your Excellency," Scott-Moncrieff replied. "Ah, my dear fellow," said Nubar, "you are quite right. I shall find you a nonentity," and was as good as his word.

The situation changed briefly in 1892 when the Khedive Tewfik died and was succeeded by his 18-year-old son, Abbas Hilmi. Abbas, who reminded people more of his grandfather, Ismail "the Magnificent," Egypt's last independent ruler, than of his vapid father, was determined not to be a puppet.

He was soon put in his place. Believing that he would have the full support of the Ottoman Sultan and France if it came to

Lord Cromer, who ruled Egypt from 1883 to 1907, was known as a stern authoritarian.

Hussein Kamel, safe and ineffectual, was made Sultan for the dangerous years 1914–18.

a showdown, he attempted to appoint a new ministry without consulting Cromer. Cromer threatened to call in British troops and impose direct rule, and Abbas resorted to asserting himself in petty ways, such as complaining that British officers were not showing sufficient respect for his rank by wearing long boots instead of trousers in his presence. Finally, he went so far as to upbraid Kitchener for the turn-out of British-officered Egyptian troops, who were parading in his honour. Kitchener offered to resign and Cromer, seizing his opportunity, forced the young Khedive to make a humiliating apology.

Abbas's spirit was broken and from then on he devoted himself increasingly to his personal affairs and the enrichment of his private estates. In 1903 Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, an anti-imperialist, aristocratic British poet who keenly supported Egyptian nationalism, wrote sadly that he found Abbas, in whom he had once had high hopes, "grown older and less fat and gay, with a rather harassed look, like a man who had been worried and bullied."

Cromer, having won his battle with "my poor little Khedive," as he disparagingly called Abbas, tended towards complacency about the British position in Egypt. He was so convinced that the benefits of British rule must be apparent to any right-minded Egyptian that he was apt to dismiss anyone who opposed it as a hooligan or scoundrel whose opinions were simply not worth taking seriously. He tolerated a free press because he did not regard it as important. He ignored the violent denunciations of the British occupation which they frequently contained. His heaviest contempt was reserved for what he called the "Gallicized Egyptians," that is those who had managed to acquire some higher education in Europe or at the French-controlled law school in Cairo.

Cromer's attitude towards the Egyptians was typical of that already found among his British contemporaries in Egypt. Even in the 1860s, before the British occupied Egypt, a book on Egypt was slated by a critic sympathetic to the country for being filled with statistics but barely mentioning the Egyptians: "The people are not real people, only parts of the scenery [to the author], as to most Europeans." During the British occupation, when there were scores of resident administrators in addition to the visitors from Britain, the situation hardly changed. Upper-class Egyptians would be invited to Residency receptions but there were scores of English families who devoted the best years of their lives to the Egyptian service and saw nothing surprising in the fact that their servants were the only Egyptians to have entered their villas in the European suburbs of Cairo. The summers were regarded as intolerable for Englishwomen and children and they were sent home from May to November; the men who remained behind divided their days between their offices and the Gezira Club. Though the raffish pleasures and easy-going sexual attitudes of Cairo and Alexandria attracted tourists and refugees from Late Victorian and Edwardian England, this hardly contributed to mutual comprehension between the two races.

The Egyptians themselves were despised. The mass of them were industrious valley farmers and not the romantic aristocrats of the desert that attracted men like T. E. Lawrence (who referred to the fellahin in one of his letters as "such worms"). At best the attitude of the British reflected Cromer's avuncular affection for the "child-like" peasants. And they were virtually unanimous in disliking and despising the new Egyptian urban intelligentsia.

Cromer's complacency blinded him to reality. It was perfectly true that these bright young lawyers and journalists were often superficial, irresponsible and over-emotional and, moreover, divorced by their education from the true feelings of the mass of their fellow countrymen who lived in the countryside. Yet they represented a real and growing opposition to the British occupation and the chief reason why they lacked the wisdom of experience was that Cromer denied them any share of political power.

This new wave of Egyptian nationalism found a natural leader in a slender and passionate youth named Mustafa Kamil (not to be confused with Turkey's great nationalist leader, Mustafa Kemal.) Kamil was one of Cromer's "Gallicized Egyptians" who had hurled himself into politics as a schoolboy and founded his own party, the National Party, in 1894, when he was only 20. He knew France's leading pro-Egyptian political and literary figures. He travelled in Austria and Germany seeking support for his cause. In Egypt the Khedive Abbas, defeated by Cromer, supplied his party with funds. In speeches and in the Press – in 1900 he founded his own paper – Mustafa Kamil denounced the British occupation.

This inevitably provoked Cromer's accusation of Muslim "fanaticism" and to counter this Kamil went out of his way to widen his appeal. Kamil encouraged both pan-Islamism and the Christian Copts. He also cultivated his relations with the Ottoman Sultan, as part of his drive for outside support.

His charismatic vitality attracted an immense following among Egyptian youth, but he was soon to be disillusioned about the outside support he could expect for his cause. He came to realize that Sultan Abdul Hamid might enjoy intriguing against Cromer, but was not prepared to risk war with Britain over Egypt. Similarly, his French friends were more interested in annoying Britain than in helping Egypt to achieve independence. Kamil's affection for France was ultimately destroyed by the Anglo-French Entente Cordiale of 1904 which, among other things, gave Britain a free hand in Egypt in return for an acknowledgement of French paramountcy in Morocco and Tunisia.

This greatly eased Cromer's task. He chose to ignore Kamil and his National Party (later, he even omitted to mention their names in his *Modern Egypt*, which he published in retirement) and to give his cautious approval to a group of moderates who founded their own party, the Hizb al-Umma or People's Party.

Yet, ironically, one of Cromer's last acts was to appoint, as Minister of Education the party's rising young star, Saad Zaghlul, who was to become the champion of unfettered Egyptian independence and Britain's implacable enemy.

Zaghlul's rise was aided when, in 1906, an event occurred that permanently embittered Anglo-Egyptian relations. In June of that year a party of British officers went out shooting pigeons in the Delta village of Denshawai. The villagers, who relied upon the birds for food, set upon the officers. In the scuffle, one officer, who became separated from the others, was so severely beaten up that he died of sunstroke on his way back, despite the effort of a friendly Egyptian fellah to help him. Both men were then found by a party of British soldiers who, assuming the fellah had murdered the Englishman, beat him to death.

The incident had been caused by the officers' insensitivity and by a misunderstanding on both sides. But Cromer and the vast majority of the European communities saw it as a symptom of the dangerous xenophobic nationalism which, fanned by the nationalists, was sweeping the countryside. The European Press in Egypt demanded exemplary punishment, a cry taken up by some London newspapers.

Their demands were heard by a special tribunal set up to try the villagers. Of the 52 accused, four were sentenced to death, two to penal servitude for life, six to imprisonment for seven years and the rest to 50 lashes. The sentences of hanging and flogging were carried out on the site of the incident – and the villagers were compelled to watch.

The effect on Egyptian opinion of the savage punishment of the villagers was electric. Editors, poets and politicians combined to denounce the "atrocity" of Denshawai. Many who had hitherto hardly been touched by nationalist feelings were converted overnight. Kamil gained a million followers at a stroke.

When Cromer, his term of office cut short by declining health, left Cairo the following year he was watched by silent, hostile crowds who stood behind the British troops lining the streets with fixed bayonets. Despite his economic achievements, Cromer left behind him a country made restive by the faults of his rule: his neglect of education, his increasing authoritarianism, his dislike of opposition and, above all, his refusal to allow Egyptians any real power which indefinitely prolonged the occupation.

Cromer's successor, Sir Eldon Gorst, small, intense and bursting with ambition, would have seemed just the man to reform British rule if he had not been so unpopular. His colleagues disliked the Teutonic earnestness of purpose which he showed as much on the tennis-court as in his office. He was mistrusted by Cromer and detested by Kitchener. To cap it all, he owed his appointment in part to his friendship with King Edward VII and the King's mistress Mrs. George Keppel.

But the newly elected Liberal government wanted a change of policy in Egypt and he was politically and personally ideal for the job. He had already served in Egypt in the key post of financial adviser. And he revelled in the power offered by his position.

He commented gleefully in his journal: "Throughout the British Empire [though Egypt never was formally in the Empire] there is no place in which the occupant enjoys greater freedom of action than that of British Agent and Consul-General in Egypt. The Consul-General is the *de facto* ruler of the country, without being hampered by a parliament or by a network of councils like the Viceroy of India and the interference of the home government has hitherto been limited to such matters as are likely to arouse interest or criticism in the British House of Commons."

Having decided on sweeping reforms, Gorst summoned all Anglo-Egyptian officials to Cairo and informed them that he intended to promote Egyptians to positions of greater responsibility. Most officials were appalled and did nothing to help Gorst carry through his new policies.

Gorst's task would have been easier if he had succeeded in gaining the confidence of the Egyptian nationalists, weakened in 1908 by the death of Kamil, aged only 34. Gorst's strategy of giving Egyptians greater authority was based on restoring the dignity and self-confidence of the Khedive, extinguished as a political force years before by Cromer. Egyptian nationalists suspected, not without reason, that in promoting and encouraging the Khedive, Gorst was aiming to further weaken nationalist forces.

Agitation increased and the press heaped a crescendo of abuse on Egyptian ministers, as well as on the English occupiers. One especially alarming aspect of the situation was the deterioration of relations between Egyptian Muslims and the 10 per cent minority of Christian Copts. This bitterness intensified when, in 1908, with Gorst's encouragement, a new government was formed under an aristocratic Copt, Boutros Ghali Pasha. Boutros Ghali was not only a Christian, but he had also been President of the Denshawai tribunal. In 1910 he was assassinated as he was standing outside his office by a young nationalist, Ibrahim al-Wardani, and students joyously chanted the name of his murderer in the streets of Cairo.

Gorst's liberal experiment was at an end. His attempt to change Britain's Egyptian policy was praiseworthy, but he had had no chance to learn from his mistakes – in 1911, he died of cancer of the spine – and Britain's Liberal government, disturbed by the rising nationalist feeling in Egypt, decided that a firm hand was required. The man chosen for the task was Kitchener.

Lord Kitchener of Khartoum (as he had now become) was at the height of his prestige. In 1905, as Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army, he had emerged victorious from a blazing row with the Viceroy, Lord Curzon, on the question of the Indian Army's submission to Viceregal control, and Curzon had resigned in disgust.

His vision of Empire matched his prestige. He shared Rhodes's dream of an all-red route the length of Africa. He dreamed of ending Turkey's nominal suzerainty over Egypt and of creating a new viceroyalty of Egypt and the Sudan, within the Empire, with himself as Viceroy.

In pursuit of this vision, he reversed

Preceded by a Muslim priest, a peasant mounts the gallows to die for the manslaughter of a British officer during a pigeon shoot in June, 1906. Three other peasants were also hanged and 40 were flogged – a vicious reprisal that long rankled with Egyptians.

Gorst's liberal policies. Like Cromer, he had a paternalistic regard for the welfare of the fellahin, but his style was more open and flamboyant: with his aura of prestige he established himself as an archetypal Oriental potentate, accepting petitions from the humble and proceeding from time to time on tours of the countryside to observe how the peasantry was faring. He firmly snubbed the "wicked little Khedive," as he referred to him in his private letters, and appointed more Englishmen to senior positions in the administration. He employed special powers to suppress the nationalists so that their leaders were either imprisoned or exiled.

However, he avoided the impression of being purely coercive. Like Cromer, he gave some cautious encouragement to the moderate nationalists of the Umma Party; he even sponsored a modest constitutional advance through the creation of a Legislative Council, some of whose members were elected (others were official appointees). Although the Council's membership was confined almost exclusively to wealthy landowners, not even Kitchener could prevent it taking on a nationalist character – especially after Saad Zaghlul, who had resigned from the government, became its first vice-president.

Then, in 1914, the slowly developing struggle between Egyptian nationalists and Britain was put in sudden abeyance by the outbreak of war. Kitchener's reign was cut short by his appointment as Secretary for War. Meetings were barred, the Press muzzled and the fledgling legislative council closed down.

From the British viewpoint, there were good strategic reasons for such stringent controls. Turkey had entered the war on the side of Germany, and Egypt, still nominally part of the Ottoman Empire, was theoretically enemy territory. After some debate between Whitehall and Cairo, in which outright annexation of Egypt was considered, a British Protectorate over Egypt was declared, replacing Cromer's "Veiled Protectorate"; the British Agent was retitled High Commissioner; and the Turcophile Khedive Abbas, who was caught by the outbreak of war on a visit to the Sultan, was deposed and replaced by his amiable elderly uncle, Hussein Kamel, who was given the title of Sultan.

Egypt was not to be formally incorporated into the British Empire; its people were subjects of the Egyptian Sultan and not of King George V. But Egyptians could be forgiven for failing to see the difference. Although Egypt was nominally neutral, martial law was declared and British and Indian troops arrived to defend the Suez Canal against possible Turkish attack. With the launching of the Gallipoli campaign in 1915, Egypt became a huge military transit and hospital camp for the Allies. Australians and New Zealanders (the Anzacs) thronged the Egyptian bars and brothels. (The annual incidence of V.D. ran up to 25 per cent in some units.)

British control was, on the surface, acceptable to Egyptians. Though the Turkish Sultan, the Caliph of Islam, called for all faithful Muslims to join in a "jehad" or holy war against the Allies, the Egyptians never responded to the Sultan's appeal, even when the Turks reached the Suez Canal. On the contrary, Egyptian artillery units took part in the defence of the Canal, and the Egyptian Labour Corps and Camel Transport Service between them contributed some 150,000 men to the Allied cause.

Though the British military authorities were too busy with the conduct of the war to be aware of it, the national movement was not dead; it had merely gone underground. The students in the cities were as rebellious as ever. The fellahin in the countryside became increasingly resentful at the war measures, which included the requisitioning of their draught animals – more precious to them than their children – the confiscation of their firearms and the reintroduction of forced labour. Profiteering by landowners, who grew cotton instead of cereals, inflicted

When the nationalist Saad Zaghlul (above), soon to be Egypt's first elected Prime Minister, sailed up the Nile in 1919 to agitate against the British, they prevented him from landing – to little avail: his undaunted supporters on the river bank staged fervent demonstrations (right).

fearful hardship on the towns and led to an outright famine in 1918.

Yet, even then, at the end of the war, very few of the British in Egypt were aware of the country's explosive mood. It was thus a considerable shock when, two days after the signing of the Armistice, Saad Zaghlul, now universally acknowledged as the unofficial leader of Egyptian nationalism, presented himself at the head of a delegation in the office of Sir Reginald Wingate, the High Commissioner, to inform him that the Egyptian people wanted their complete independence and that he would like to lead his delegation to London to negotiate with the British government.

They had good reason for confidence. Declarations by the Allies, including the United States, had promised self-determination to the peoples freed from Turkish rule. Already the Arabs of Arabia, whom the Egyptians regarded as more backward than themselves, were looking forward to independence and preparing to send a delegate to the Peace Conference in Versailles. But British imperial interests in Egypt were too great for the government to consider granting their request.

The Foreign Secretary, A. J. Balfour, curtly replied that "no useful purpose" would be served by Zaghlul's visit. He later relented to say he would receive the Egyptian Prime Minister, Rushdi Pasha, but not Zaghlul, who had no official status. But Rashdi could do nothing without Zaghlul and the massive support he commanded, so the Egyptian Prime Minister resigned with his whole cabinet on March 1, 1919.

Thereafter, Anglo-Egyptian relations deteriorated rapidly. Zaghlul called upon the country to protest; the British authorities in Egypt, making use of martial law which was still in force, deported Zaghlul and three of his colleagues to Malta. In consequence, there occurred what Egyptians refer to as the 1919 Revolution.

Beginning with violent student demonstrations and strikes, protest spread first to civil servants and to professions and then – to the astonishment of Anglo-Egyptians, who believed the fellahin were impervious to student agitation – to the countryside. Telegraph-wires were cut, railway tracks torn up and stations burned down. Individual Englishmen were murdered. In the worst incident seven unarmed soldiers and one civilian were killed and mutilated by a frenzied mob on the train from Luxor to Cairo. At each station along the line, the train bearing the bodies was greeted with shouts of joy.

General Sir E. Bulfin, commander of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, mobilized all the troops he had available, issued stern warnings to Egyptian notables and government officials and dispatched mobile columns to every trouble spot. Planes bombed suspicious gatherings and armoured cars fired on suspect groups near roads or railways. Gradually, the country was sullenly pacified.

News of the events in Egypt was as unwelcome as it was unexpected to the Lloyd George government, which was heavily involved in the affairs of the Peace Conference in Paris. They decided to give full military and civil powers to General Lord Edmund Allenby, who in 1917 had taken Jerusalem and then forced the capitulation of Turkey, to restore law and order in Egypt.

The result was an odd and welcome reversal of policy.* Despite Allenby's formidable military bearing – he was known as the "Bull" – he had strong liberal

Lord Kitchener, British Agent from 1911 to 1914, urged the outright annexation of Egypt.

instincts. On his arrival in Cairo, he quickly reached the conclusion that many of the Egyptians' grievances were justified. He also had a strong belief that the Egyptians should be allowed to administer themselves as far as possible. He persuaded a reluctant British government to allow the immediate return to Egypt of Zaghlul and his colleagues.

Egypt went wild with joy, but Allenby's hopes that the country would settle down were disappointed. The nationalists continued their compaign against the Protectorate; strikes, protests, demonstrations and occasional assassinations of British officials continued. In this tense atmosphere the British government, in December, 1919, sent out a high-powered Commission of Inquiry under Lord Milner. Milner had once been an arch-imperialist: he had already served in Egypt and written a justification for British intervention there; and it was he who had been the most powerful advocate of war against the Boers in 1899. But now almost 70, and exhausted by his years in the War Cabinet, he had mellowed.

After a bleak and hostile visit to Egypt – the nationalists boycotted him and the moderates were afraid to offer their cooperation – Milner reached the same conclusion as Allenby: the Protectorate would have to go.

It was not, of course, as simple as that: Britain had important interests in Egypt, which was still the vital link with the Indian Empire and also the key to Africa in which Britain had recently enlarged her colonial possessions through the break-up of Germany's East African Empire.

On Milner's return in March, 1920, he recommended that both Britain and Egypt should sign a treaty recognizing Egypt as an independent constitutional monarchy but – to safeguard British interests – with its independence qualified in a number of respects, of which the most important was the establishment of a permanent military alliance.

It was hopeless: no Egyptian political leader would agree to terms which implied so many limitations to Egypt's sovereignty. Some moderates might have done so, but they did not dare take action in the face of Zaghlul's opposition. On the British side, many cabinet members, led by the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Churchill, strongly opposed accepting even limited Egyptian independence.

Nearly two years passed in fruitless discussions while, in Egypt, the strikes and sporadic violence continued. In December, 1921, Allenby in exasperation sent Zaghlul into a second exile, this time to the Seychelles. The agitation died down, but Allenby knew he had gained only a temporary respite.

Lord Milner headed the mission that in 1920 reviewed the British Protectorate in Egypt. Though formerly an arch-imperialist, he alarmed Whitehall by advising independence.

He decided to act: on February 10, 1922, he arrived in London with what amounted to an ultimatum to Lloyd George: either the Prime Minister declare Egypt's independence or accept his resignation (which would leave him free to make a strong and influential attack on the government in the House of Lords). When the Prime Minister raised objections at their meeting, Allenby cut him short. "I have waited five weeks for a decision and I can't wait any longer." "You have waited five weeks, Lord Allenby," said Lloyd George. "Wait five more minutes." He then capitulated and accepted Allenby's proposals.

Britain's unilateral declaration of Egypt's independence was made on February 28, 1922. Sultan Fuad, who had succeeded on the death of his brother, Hussein, in 1917, became King Fuad I, with considerable powers provided by a parliamentary constitution. But independence was severely qualified, for Britain reserved rights on four matters: the security of imperial communications in Egypt; the defence of Egypt; the protection of foreign interests and minorities; and the Sudan. These matters were to be the subject of bilateral negotiations at a future date.

In other words, the hated Capitulations, the military occupation (though it was officially denied that the continued presence of British troops implied an occupation) and British control over the Sudan were all to be retained. British officials remained, though their numbers were to be steadily reduced. And in recognition of Britain's privileged position in Egypt, Allenby retained the title of High Commissioner instead of becoming Ambassador.

But there was no denying that British influence had been severely reduced. Instead of the British Residency being the only real centre of power in the country, it had to share it with the Palace and Zaghlul's party, now known as the Wafd, after the Arabic for "delegation" in commemoration of the original group that Zaghlul had led to see Wingate in 1918. Their three-cornered struggle lasted with varying intensity for the next 30 years, providing the dominant theme in Egyptian history until Nasser's rise to power in the 1950s.

Zaghlul returned from exile in 1923 to triumph the following year in Egypt's first parliamentary election, from which he emerged as Prime Minister. But Zaghlul's hopes of reaching a settlement of the four reserved points with Ramsay MacDonald's newly elected Labour government were soon dashed: Labour was, it turned out, as mindful of imperial interests as the Tories.

Agitation once again increased, especially over the vexed question of British rule in the Sudan. On November 19, Sir Lee Stack, the Sirdar of the Egyptian Army (who was also by convention Governor-General of the Sudan), was murdered as he was driving through Cairo by a group of Egyptian terrorists.

Allenby's reaction showed how far Egypt's sovereignty was still limited. Without awaiting Foreign Office instructions he issued an ultimatum which included, apart from the condign punishment of the criminals, the payment of a £500,000 fine, the banning of all political demonstrations, the withdrawal from the Sudan of all Egyptian officers and units, an unlimited increase in the irrigated area in the Sudan (at the expense of Egypt's share in the Nile waters) and the withdrawal of all opposition to the British government's wishes concerning the protection of foreign interests.

When Zaghlul's government rejected several terms of the ultimatum, the British expressed their determination to enforce them and occupied a customs post to prove it. Helpless, Zaghlul resigned.

Nothing, however, changed. The dapper little Lord Lloyd, enthusiastic imperialist and close friend of Winston Churchill, who succeeded Allenby and served as High Commissioner from 1925 to 1929, put his finger on the anomaly of Britain's role in Egypt in a letter to a friend. "Our present position is impossible. . . . We cannot carry on much longer as we are. We have magnitude without position; power without authority; responsibility without

control. I must insure that no foreign power intervenes in education, aviation, wireless communications, railways or army (where all seek to do so) and I must achieve this without upsetting the parliamentary regime which we forced upon the country in the face of the king's wishes; without weakening the power or alienating the loyalty of the monarchy which we set up, and without displaying the military power which is in fact our sole remaining effective argument. I must maintain and respect Egyptian independence and yet justify our army of occupation."

It was an impossible situation, rendered many times more complex by the British need to fight both King and the Wafd, and by the struggle between these two. Although Lloyd was strongly critical of the system he had inherited from Allenby, he honestly attempted to make it work to the extent of putting pressure on King Fuad to respect the parliamentary constitution. This the King was unwilling to do.

King Fuad (and his son Farouk, who succeeded him in 1936) saw the Wafd rather than Britain as his enemy. Whenever elections were held under the 1923 constitution the Wafd, as the only party with mass support, always won a sweeping victory. The King would bide his time until the Wafd committed some act of folly, as it invariably did, which enabled him to suspend or amend the constitution to rig the elections, send the Wafd into opposition and rule through some forceful independent of his own choosing. Popular pressure would then build up until he had to restore the constitution and allow the Wafd to return to power.

In June, 1930, King Fuad once again succeeded in getting rid of the Wafd, dissolving Parliament and suspending the constitution. Five years of quasi-dictatorship began. Inevitably popular agitation grew for the restoration of the constitution and Parliament. In 1936, just before his death, Fuad gave way.

The Wafd returned to power – and in an odd reversal of its extreme nationalist policies, signed the treaty suggested under the terms for independence. Six attempts to reach a treaty agreement with Britain had been made during the previous 14 years by various governments and all had broken down – usually over the Sudanese question. There were, however, good reasons for signing. With the chastening experience of many years out of office, the Wafd had come to realize the disadvantage of fighting both the Palace and the British at the same time. And they had become thoroughly alarmed at the rise of Fascism: Mussolini's imperial ambitions in Africa, against which Egypt would be virtually defenceless without Britain as an ally.

The treaty, under which Britain retained a dominant if diminished influence, was to run for 20 years; both parties were committed to negotiating a further alliance in 1956, when Egypt would have the right to submit to third-party judgement the question of whether British troops were any longer necessary in Egypt. The British occupation of Egypt was formally ended, though British troops

Ahmed Fuad I (left), King of a nominally independent Egypt, rides with President Hindenburg during his state visit to Berlin in the late 1920s.

were to remain in some areas. As Egypt's self-defence capability improved, they would be withdrawn gradually to the Canal Zone and Sinai where their numbers would be limited to 10,000. And Britain reserved the right of reoccupation with the unrestricted use of Egyptian ports, airports and roads in war-time.

It was, nevertheless, an advance towards total independence. Egypt gained control over its own security forces for the first time since 1882. The British High Commissioner became an Ambassador. An Egyptian replaced the British Inspector-General of the Army and the country's military intelligence was Egyptianized. The number of Europeans in the police was to be reduced by 20 per cent a year, although an Englishman, Thomas Russell, scourge of narcotics pedlars, remained head of the Egyptian police until 1946. Britain sponsored Egypt's entry into the League of Nations. The Capitulations were finally removed and Egypt obtained full rights of jurisdiction and taxation over all residents.

A new and hopeful period seemed to have opened. The treaty was popular: the Prime Minister, Nahas Pasha, and even Sir Miles Lampson, the British Ambassador, were cheered in the streets. Fuad's young successor, Farouk, a handsome, outgoing 16-year-old, was wildly popular with his subjects.

This heady mood of optimism did not last. Farouk, although not unintelligent, was spoiled and wilful. With astonishing speed, the golden boy-king declined morally and physically into a corrupt, frivolous and premature middle age which made him an object of ridicule. Then, in 1939, practically all the advantages Egypt had gained by the treaty were destroyed by the outbreak of war: once again Egypt, virtually an ally under the terms of the 1936 treaty, was occupied by a huge imperial army.

At first, there was no apparent loss of harmony. But Italy's entry into the war in June, 1940, transformed the situation. Many Egyptians both expected and

Upper Crust on the Upper Nile

The Battle of Omdurman in 1898, which smashed the Sudan dervishes, heralded British rule over the Sudan and prepared the way for an administrative system that, even by the demanding standards set by the Indian Civil Service, was remarkable for its high-mindedness, idealism and effectiveness. It also mirrored the attitudes and prejudices of the English upper middle classes.

Like Egypt, the Sudan was not absorbed into the Empire. Instead, it was organized as an "Anglo-Egyptian Condominium." In practice, this meant that, as in Egypt itself, the British were the effective rulers. The Sudan Political Service, as a result of the country's peculiar political situation, did not fall under the umbrella of the Colonial Office and was run as a separate service.

But the background, abilities and conduct of the men who were recruited provide a vivid illustration of what the British regarded as ideal in those selected to rule the colonial Empire.

High academic qualifications were not required and there was no competitive examination. As Lord Cromer, the virtual ruler of Egypt, put it candidates needed no more than "good health, high character and fair abilities." It was taken for granted that applicants possessing these qualifications would have the right social background. One successful candidate in 1911 attributed his selection to his performance in the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race. Candidates were also expected to be ethnically respectable, and on occasions this consideration was made explicit. A memo from Lord Cromer about an advertised post said: "I have erased the words 'British Subjects,' not that there is any intention of engaging others, but there is no necessity to say so in official documents."

But even being British was not enough. Sir Reginald Wingate, ruler of the Sudan from 1899 to 1916, wrote of one candidate: "There is something Levantine about him . . . that fact alone makes him undesirable." Yet, the system worked.

Sport-loving young officers, academically unqualified, with minimal Arabic, found themselves in charge of a subdistrict the size of Wales and succeeded in making themselves trusted and respected by its people. Good order in the Sudan improved the economy, revenues increased tenfold between 1900 and 1913. New cotton-fields were planted, railways built, and the slave trade was reduced to a small scale.

After a tour of inspection in 1909, Sir Eldon Gorst, Cromer's successor in Egypt, declared complacently: "I do not suppose that there is any part of the world in which the mass of the population have fewer unsatisfied wants."

hoped for an Axis victory, not out of sympathy with Fascism but because they believed it would finally rid Egypt of the British. (One such Egyptian was the young Captain Anwar Sadat, now Egyptian President, who was caught by British Intelligence and interned for spying for the Axis.) Winston Churchill, who had never shown much sympathy for Egyptian nationalist feelings, declared it was intolerable that Cairo should be a "nest of Hun spies" and gave orders for the dismissal of the pro-Axis Egyptian Chief of Staff and the removal of all Egyptian troops from the front line.

Matters came to a head in February, 1942, when General Rommel was advancing into Egypt from Libya and his name was being chanted in the streets of Cairo. Farouk, who was anyway suspect for the numerous Italians in his entourage, was thought to be on the point of appointing a new Prime Minister with anti-British and pro-Axis sympathies. On February 2, 1942, the Abdin Palace was surrounded by British tanks and the towering figure of Sir Miles Lampson forced his way into the King's presence to present him with a choice between abdication and forming a Wafd government under Nahas. To Lampson's dismay, because he had hoped to be rid of Farouk, the King gave way and reluctantly sent for Nahas. For the rest of

General Sir Lee Stack (above), Governor-General of the Sudan and C.-in-C. of the Egyptian Army – whose cavalry is pictured left – was shot dead in November, 1924, by nationalists in Cairo. Britain fined Egypt £500,000, imposed restrictions on her sovereignty and hanged three terrorists.

the war the Wafd fulfilled Britain's wishes.

After the war, the Egyptian government believed that the country's fulfilment of its treaty obligations during the war gave it the right to generous treatment from Britain. The decision had anyway been taken to grant independence to India, removing the chief historical reason for the continued occupation of Egypt. In 1946 Britain accepted the principle of total evacuation, but once again failed to reach a firm agreement on terms: Egypt refused to accept British sovereignty over the Sudan. British troops remained in the Canal Zone, 80,000 of them, eight times as many as stipulated by the 1936 treaty, a constant affront to Egyptian pride.

The nationalists, initially incensed by Farouk's feeble capitulation and the Wafd's war-time collaboration with Britain, now had an additional grievance. In the Army, an organization formed during the war by a brilliant young captain, Gamal Abdel Nasser, plotted the overthrow of the monarchy.

The régime tottered from crisis to crisis. In 1948 its ill-trained and ill-equipped army suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the new state of Israel. In 1950 King Farouk turned in despair to his old enemies, the Wafd, who, still anxious to prove their soiled nationalist credentials, stepped up the anti-British campaign, denounced the 1936 treaty unilaterally and launched a sabotage and guerrilla campaign against the Suez Canal Zone.

In January 1952, after a particularly severe British act of retaliation against Ismailia police headquarters, which were being used as a centre for guerrilla activity, the frenzied Cairo mob burned the centre of the city, concentrating their fury on buildings with British and other foreign associations. It was not until the evening that either the King or the government made any move to call in the army to restore order.

When they did they were prompted by the real fear that the British might intervene from the Central Zone. No Egyptian in authority had forgotten that the riots in Alexandria had been the chief justification for the British invasion of Egypt 70 years before. A plan had already been worked out with the British commanding officer in Suez to intervene to protect the lives and property of British subjects and they could have been in the capital within a few hours. The Egyptian Army's move to clear the streets of rioters removed the threat of a new British occupation in the nick of time.

The King blamed the disaster on the Wafd and dismissed Nahas. But the country was now virtually ungovernable.

As a result, in July, 1952, Nasser's Free Officers were able to overthrow the monarchy and parliamentary régime with astonishing ease. The British made no attempt to intervene. At first, all went well with the new government. Whatever Britain's doubts about the ability of a bunch of young colonels to govern Egypt, they seemed able to maintain order and protect foreign interests.

They also showed political sagacity by announcing their willingness to separate the Sudan question from that of the Suez Canal Zone and the British base – a move that could have solved Anglo-Egyptian difficulties at a stroke.

It was also an astute move to oust Britain from the Sudan, and preserve Egyptian influence there. Over the years of Anglo-Egyptian deadlock since 1936, Britain had acted unilaterally to establish the Sudan as an independent, pro-British entity. In 1948 an elected Legislative Assembly was formed representing the whole country. When, in 1951, Egypt's Wafdist government declared Farouk King of Egypt and Sudan and enacted its own Sudanese constitution, Britain refused to recognize the move and proceeded with plans for Sudanese self-government under a British governor-general.

The situation was entirely changed by the Egyptian coup of July, 1952. The new régime formally accepted the right of the Sudanese to self-determination and therefore to the choice of independence. The Free Officers thought they were calling Britain's bluff because they honestly believed that, once they were given a free choice, the majority of Sudanese would opt for union with Egypt.

Having accepted the principle of self-determination, both Britain and Egypt had to run the risk that, at the coming elections, the Sudanese would choose full independence. To Britain's dismay, the elections were won by a coalition of groups which stood for union with Egypt. But also, to *Egypt's* dismay, the Sudanese nationalist parties at once about-faced and expressed their desire for complete independence. In August, 1955, the Sudanese Parliament passed a resolution demanding the evacuation of both British and Egyptian forces from the Sudan. On January 1, 1956, the flag of the Sudanese Republic was raised and the 57-year life of Cromer's curious brainchild, the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, came to an end.

Egyptian and British disappointment over the result of the Sudanese settlement did not improve relations between the two countries, but it opened the way towards an agreement on a British evacuation of Egypt – the principal goal of all the Free Officers. Negotiations were prolonged and difficult because, although British military opinion had by now conceded that Egypt was no longer vital to British or Western defence strategy (especially since Turkey had entered N.A.T.O.), they were still anxious to retain several thousand British troops to man the installations at the Suez base.

This was the one concession that the young Colonel Nasser, who was leading the negotiations for Egypt, would not make: he would accept civilian technicians, but not soldiers in uniform. In return for a complete military evacuation, he was prepared to agree to the reactivation of the Suez base in event of an outside (i.e. Soviet) attack on any Arab state or Turkey. In the end, a formula was found whereby the base installations would be maintained on a seven-year lease with a cadre of British civilians on contract to British firms. The final agreement was signed in Cairo on October 18, 1954. On March 31, 1956, some three months earlier than was provided for in the agreement, the last British troops pulled out of their base in Port Said.

EGYPT'S BRIGHT HOPE

Farouk, ten, smiles happily.

When the 16-year-old Farouk arrived in Cairo in May, 1936, to succeed his late father, King Ahmed Fuad I, vast crowds gave him a tumultuous reception. He was their idol – handsome, self-assured. impressive, apparently a leader to generate national rebirth. He would, his people hoped, end the corruption endemic in Egypt, eliminate the feudal system, abolish peasant forced labour and drive away the British.

Farouk was like-minded. "I declare it is my duty to work with you for the good of our beloved Egypt," he said in a radio broadcast. "With all my will I shall seek to reform the country." But destiny was to cast the well-meaning young monarch in a different and unfortunately much less alluring role.

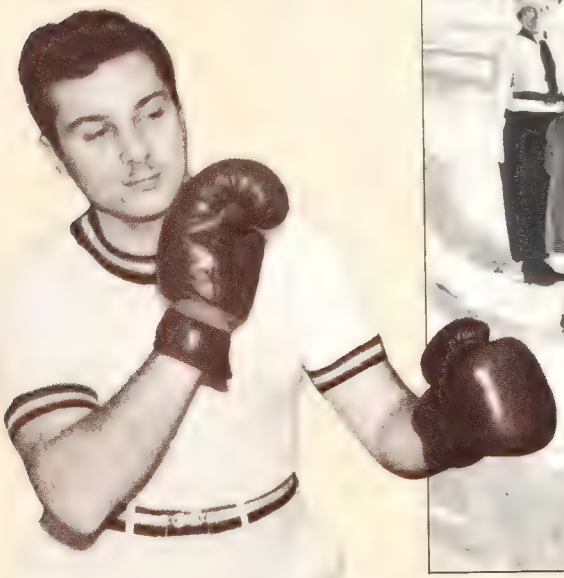
The young Prince learns to ri
But he was never a good hors
man, appearing to dislike hor

Prince Farouk takes his three sisters for a ride in a Baby Austin 7.

The future King poses in a rowing-

The Prince parades in Boy Scout uniform. He was Egypt's Chief Scout

Prince Farouk, aged 16, takes up boxing. In the arena of Egyptian politics, he was to prove a much tougher and more elusive target.



Farouk puts in his first royal appearance at the international ski resort of St. Moritz.

Farouk as a teenage idol.

Last Fling of the Loaded Dice

Farouk's image remained bright until well into the Second World War, but all was not well. An emotionally deprived childhood, a chronic lack of education – he was too ill-taught to enter Eton – the glandular problem which retarded his sexual development and blighted his marriage, all caused fatal flaws in his character. Soon, adversity was to worsen them. In 1942, to prevent suspected pro-Axis moves, the British offered him the choice of abdicating or installing a government of their choosing. Farouk installed a puppet government – and quickly deteriorated under the shock of such a grave political defeat.

He grew fat, prematurely aged, and became a prey to graft, gambling and women – especially women – for he wished to create a spurious reputation for sexual athleticism. It was a disastrous combination of vices. "A man who can lose £50,000 in a night can lose anything," reflected one courtier, and so it proved. On July 26, 1952, Farouk was ousted in an army coup that was to bring Nasser to power. He died, 13 years of lonely exile later, largely unmourned.

Farouk gives his arm to Queen Farida after their wedding on January 12, 1938, in Cairo.

The elegant young King inspects a guard of honour in his capital.

The King poses beside his "bag" of duck. His servants would add more, to ensure him the best score.

Farouk, in Air Marshal's uniform, and already obese at 25, meets Winston Churchill in Cairo in February, 1945. Obsessive gluttony became the King's compensation for inadequate sexuality.

King Farouk and King Ibn Saud of Arabia drive by coach through Cairo's Opera Square during Saud's visit after the Second World War.

Parading by a pool appealed more to Farouk than uniformed ceremonial.

The King stands protectively by his second wife, 18-year-old Queen Narriman, and their son, Crown Prince Ahmed Fuad.

Farouk drives to a state function shortly before his fall from power.

The exiled monarch relaxes on Capri with Queen Narriman, their young son, Ahmed Fuad, and the daughters of his first marriage.

II. Swansong of British Imperialism

At the signing of the 1954 agreement, Nasser remarked: "A new era of friendly relations based on mutual trust, confidence and co-operation exists between Egypt and Britain and the Western countries. . . . We want to get rid of the hatred in our hearts and start building up our relations with Britain on a solid basis of mutual trust and confidence which has been lacking for the past 70 years."

It was not to be. The antagonisms engendered during the negotiations over the Sudan and the Suez base grew into something much worse. In 1954, Gamal Abdel Nasser began to look far beyond Egypt's borders towards the creation of a neutral and independent Arab bloc under Egyptian leadership allied to other nations in Africa and Asia. The British government, still inclined to patronize Egypt as a natural Western satellite, soon came to regard Nasser's revolutionary régime as a mortal danger to the remaining British interests in the Arab world.

The Prime Minister, Anthony Eden, developed an almost pathological hatred of Nasser whom he regarded as the source of all Britain's troubles in the Middle East. When King Hussein of Jordan dismissed General Glubb, the British commander of his army, Eden wrongly assumed Nasser was responsible. He shouted at Anthony Nutting, Minister of State at the Foreign Office: "But what's all this nonsense about isolating Nasser, of 'neutralizing' him, as you call it? I want him destroyed, can't you understand?"

Both the opportunity and the grounds were soon to be provided. In 1955 the Western Powers had not altogether given up hope of keeping Egypt within their orbit. Their weapon was two-edged: economic control which would, it was assumed, lead to political control.

The U.S. and British governments began discussions with Egypt to finance the building of a huge dam on the Nile south of Aswan. Desperately worried by Egypt's breakneck population growth, which was not being matched by increased production or exports, the Free Officers were pinning their hopes for the future on the dam and encouraging the public to do the same.

In February, 1956, a provisional agreement was announced by which the World Bank would lend $200,000,000 on condition that the U.S. and Britain would between them lend another $70,000,000 and Egypt provide the equivalent of $900,000,000 in the form of local services and materials.

The West attached stringent terms to the loan which Nasser hesitated to accept. When he finally made up his mind it was too late. Whether the U.S. and British governments ever seriously expected the project to be approved by Congress and the British Parliament is doubtful, but by the summer of 1956 they had decided to administer a sharp rebuff to Nasser, intending to topple him or render him more pliable. On July 19, the U.S. Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, coldly informed the pro-American Egyptian Ambassador in Washington that the U.S. had decided not to give any aid to the dam because the Egyptian economy was too unstable for so large a scheme. The World Bank and Britain at once withdrew their offers.

To the surprise of the West, Nasser retaliated. A few days later he told a vast cheering crowd in Alexandria that the Suez Canal – "our canal" in his own forthright words – had been nationalized. Egypt would build the High Dam with the revenues from the Canal and if the imperialist powers did not like it they could "choke in their rage."

There was apparently no way of stopping him. Most Egyptians were delighted, for the Suez Canal Company was widely hated as a symbol of foreign exploitation. And according to international law, the act of nationalization was impeccable because Nasser offered full compensation to the shareholders. This was implicitly acknowledged by Eden when he dismissed any discussion of its legality as "quibbles."

At once, Eden began to discuss with his colleagues means of bringing the strongest political pressure on Egypt to accept international control. If this failed, he was determined to use force. His difficulty

Sir Anthony Eden, whose hatred of Nasser verged on hysteria, warns foreign diplomats in London that the Egyptian seizure of the Suez Canal was the "gravest occasion since the war."

was that while many countries, including Egypt's friends such as India, disliked the way in which Nasser had nationalized the Canal Company the great majority – including the United States – were resolutely opposed to the use of force.

However, Eden, whose hatred of Nasser had reached a point by which he was no longer rational, was supported – even when the invasion was launched – by most of his colleagues and much of the British press and public. (Indeed, the Labour Opposition developed a campaign against him only when it realized he was planning a military adventure.) The so-called Suez Group of right-wing Tory M.P.s who had opposed the 1954 agreement with Egypt now claimed to have been justified. As one of them put it: "The Suez Canal and the area surrounding it are in some essential sense part of the United Kingdom." And on the day of the invasion itself, a newspaper headline crowed: "It's Great Britain again!"

Eden also had the full support of the French government, led by the Socialist Guy Mollet, which had convinced itself that Egyptian support was keeping the Algerian Rebellion alive.

By the end of July, British and French ministers were preparing joint plans for the invasion of Egypt. Early in August, Eden announced partial mobilization; the proclamation was rushed to the Queen at Goodwood races where she signed it on the rump of a racehorse. Meanwhile, Britain and France pursued their efforts to impose international control on the Canal, but since it was reasonably certain that Egypt would reject internationalization they also went ahead with plans for military intervention. In August Britain invited the principal Canal users to a conference in London. A few days before the conference, Eden, speaking on TV, referred to Nasser in such insulting terms ("a man who cannot be trusted to keep an agreement. . . . We all know this is how fascist governments behave") that, as he must have expected, Egypt refused to attend. A majority at the conference endorsed a U.S. proposal for international control. This was taken to Cairo by the strongly pro-Eden Australian Premier, Robert Menzies, and, to no one's surprise, was rejected by Nasser.

The next Anglo-French step was to withdraw all their pilots from the Suez Canal Company in the expectation that this would slow or stop traffic and provide an excuse for intervention. The scheme failed because the Egyptians, by working overtime and hiring some extra pilots from sympathetic nations, managed to keep the Canal running normally and even to increase traffic.

In September, the Eden government began to think in terms of collaborating with Israel in an attack on Egypt. Israel had its own reasons for wishing to invade. It had been in a state of war or semi-war with Arab states since its foundation eight years before; Arab invaders were continually mounting raids across the border from Sinai and Egyptian vessels had blockaded the Gulf of Aqaba, Israel's outlet into the Red Sea. France was already in close contact with Israel and Britain was now brought in to form a tripartite anti-Egyptian front. The plan was sealed at a secret meeting at Sèvres in France on October 22–24 between the Israeli Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, and the Foreign Ministers of France and Great Britain.

Although Eden, was almost past caring about the appalling risks of taking a divided nation into war against the advice of its principal ally, he was conscious of the threat to British interests in the Arab world if collusion with Israel became known. He therefore insisted on the strictest secrecy.

In accordance with the plan, Israel invaded Sinai on October 29. The next day Britain and France issued a joint ultimatum calling on Egypt and Israel to cease fighting and to withdraw their forces ten miles from the Canal, failing which Anglo-French forces would "intervene with whatever strength may be necessary to ensure compliance." Israel, whose forces were nowhere near the Canal yet, and whose "withdrawal" would thus entail a massive advance, accepted the ultimatum; Nasser, who by the terms of the ultimatum would have to voluntarily abandon territory he had not yet lost, rejected it.

On October 31, when the ultimatum expired, British and French planes began to bomb Egyptian airfields and radio stations and within three days almost the entire Egyptian Air Force, except for the planes sent to Syria for safety, had been destroyed on the ground. On November 5, the Anglo-French invasion force which had been assembled in Cyprus landed near Port Said and, after capturing the city, which suffered some heavy damage, advanced southwards along the Canal.

In retaliation the Egyptians had blocked the Canal with scores of ships and the Syrians had blown up the oil pipelines and pumping-stations on their territory, thus threatening Western Europe with the possibility of a serious oil shortage ❧

Nasser met Eden only once but was left with the impression that the British Prime Minister regarded him as merely "a junior official."

Flaming military installations light up British commandos invading Port Said at dawn on November 6, 1956. Paratroops had landed the day before.

SUEZ 1956

On July 26, 1956, Egypt's President Nasser nationalized the French- and British-owned Suez Canal. Seeing this as a threat to British interests so serious as to justify the use of force, Britain's Prime Minister, Sir Anthony Eden, secretly initiated plans for an Anglo-French invasion. The two countries prepared for joint operations by air, land and sea, inviting Israel, long angered by Egypt's attacks on her territory and support for Palestine guerrillas, to strike at the same time. On October 29 the Israelis attacked, giving Britain and France an excuse to invade Egypt in the guise of peacemakers and protectors of the Canal. The world, undeceived, rounded upon them and enforced withdrawal, humiliating proof that Britain's days of Big Power intervention were well and truly over.

R.A.F. crews on Cyprus race for their Canberra bombers prior to raiding Egyptian airfields.

A bridge lies in the water of the Suez Canal after a

Israeli motorized infantry, part of the force that crossed into Sinai on October 29, leap from a troop-carrier to begin an attack.

neat blowing-up operation by Egyptian sappers.

The Three "Musketeers" Move In

Anxious to carry out her part of the secret agreement with Britain and France, Israel made a four-pronged attack on Sinai with airborne and ground troops on October 29, and by the 30th had, with French and British aid, inflicted a heavy defeat on the ill-organized Egyptian Army.

Assuming the role of spontaneous peacemakers, Britain and France on that day issued a joint ultimatum, which, as part of the conspiracy, had been drawn up five days before. It demanded that both belligerents should cease fighting and that, within 12 hours, the Egyptians should move ten miles west and the Israelis ten miles east of the Canal, leaving the Canal Zone neutral.

Since Egyptian troops were already fighting the Israelis on Egyptian soil up to 125 miles east of the Canal, the ultimatum meant that they were now asked to retire 135 miles into their own country while the Israelis moved into it no less than 115 miles. If both sides did not agree to comply by the end of the time limit, Anglo-French forces would seize the Canal. Israel quickly agreed; Egypt naturally refused, and the Anglo-French military operations, code-named "Musketeer" by Supreme Commander General Sir Charles Keightley, were authorized at 3 p.m. on October 31. The first strikes against the Egyptian Air Force began a few hours later. R.A.F. and French Air Force bombers in Malta and Cyprus, aided by raiders from the Combined Fleet's five carriers, screamed over Egyptian airfields, knocking out aircraft on the ground, blowing huge holes in the runways and setting hangars aflame.

In 36 hours the enemy air force was annihilated. Port Said military targets were next destroyed. By Sunday, November 4, the way was clear for the airborne landings. On the stage of world politics, the issues were equally clear-cut: other nations were almost unanimously incensed at the blatant cynicism with which the invasion had been engineered.

French paratroopers drop on November 5 for their assault on Port Fuad, which they took that night after bitter fighting.

A French "para," in the uniform of General Massu's élite Parachute Regiment, takes bearings seconds after his drop.

rench paratroops race to their assembly-
oint after their 5 a.m. drop on November 5.
hey went on to assault the two vital Canal
ridges linking Port Said and Port Fuad,
izing them after two hours of sharp fighting.

Race for the Canal

Britain and France were assailed by an overnight chorus of loud and world-wide disapproval. The Russians threatened them with rockets, members of the U.N. Security Council called for a ceasefire, which they twice vetoed.

Even President Eisenhower, on whom Eden had relied for support, publicly upbraided Britain. And on November 2 the General Assembly of the U.N. voted for an immediate ceasefire, with only Australia and New Zealand upholding Britain. To make matters worse, Israel, which had gained vastly, and Egypt, which had suffered enough, both agreed to end the fighting. Swift action by Britain and France was now vital if their declared aim of "separating the combatants" and seizing the Canal was to be a success.

They therefore advanced the date of their airborne assault, even though this would cause the paratroops to be unsupported for 24 hours by armoured units sailing from Malta. At 5 a.m. on November 5, British troops dropped on Port Said's Gamil airfield, capturing it after two hours of fierce fighting. The French seized two vital bridges and, later, Port Fuad. The Canal was nearly theirs.

An alert French paratrooper in Port Said edges cautiously from cover after firing on the enemy.

British paratroops with automatic weapons help hold a main avenue in Port Said.

An Israeli column of troops and guns advances into Sinai past Egyptian Army transport wrecked by aerial attack in the early stages of the invasion.

Twisted by the force of explosions, these ships were two of 27 sunk by Egypt to block the Canal as an economic reprisal against her invaders.

British troops embark at Port Said after a campaign which had cost much in money and prestige – and gained nothing but scorn.

End of an Epoch

November 6, 1956, was to mark the end of an epoch. In the early hours, British seaborne reinforcements poured into Port Said from Malta and the bitter struggle for the town began. That evening, while the battle still raged, a column of tanks and paratroops was roaring south towards Suez.

But suddenly the political and economic opposition became decisive. The pound plummeted throughout the world, while Arab countries stopped the flow of oil. Britain lacked dollars to buy American oil and President Eisenhower refused American credit unless Britain ordered a ceasefire by midnight that day and agreed to quit Egypt completely. Eden had no choice but to surrender. The units racing down the Canal road ground to a midnight halt at El Cap, a quarter of the way to Suez. Soon, a U.N. Emergency Force moved in to police the ceasefire and withdrawal. The last fling of Empire had failed.

U.N. troops arrive at Port Said with their equipment to police the ceasefire.

III. The Slowly Fading Ghosts

The Egyptians were enormously aided by world reaction to the invasion. By an overwhelming majority, the nations of the world, including the U.S. and all the Commonwealth countries except Australia and New Zealand, opposed the Anglo-French action and called for an immediate ceasefire. The Soviet Premier, Bulganin, sent threatening messages to London, Paris and Tel-Aviv. It was the U.S. attitude above all that proved decisive: President Eisenhower refused to supply oil to the West until Britain called a halt.

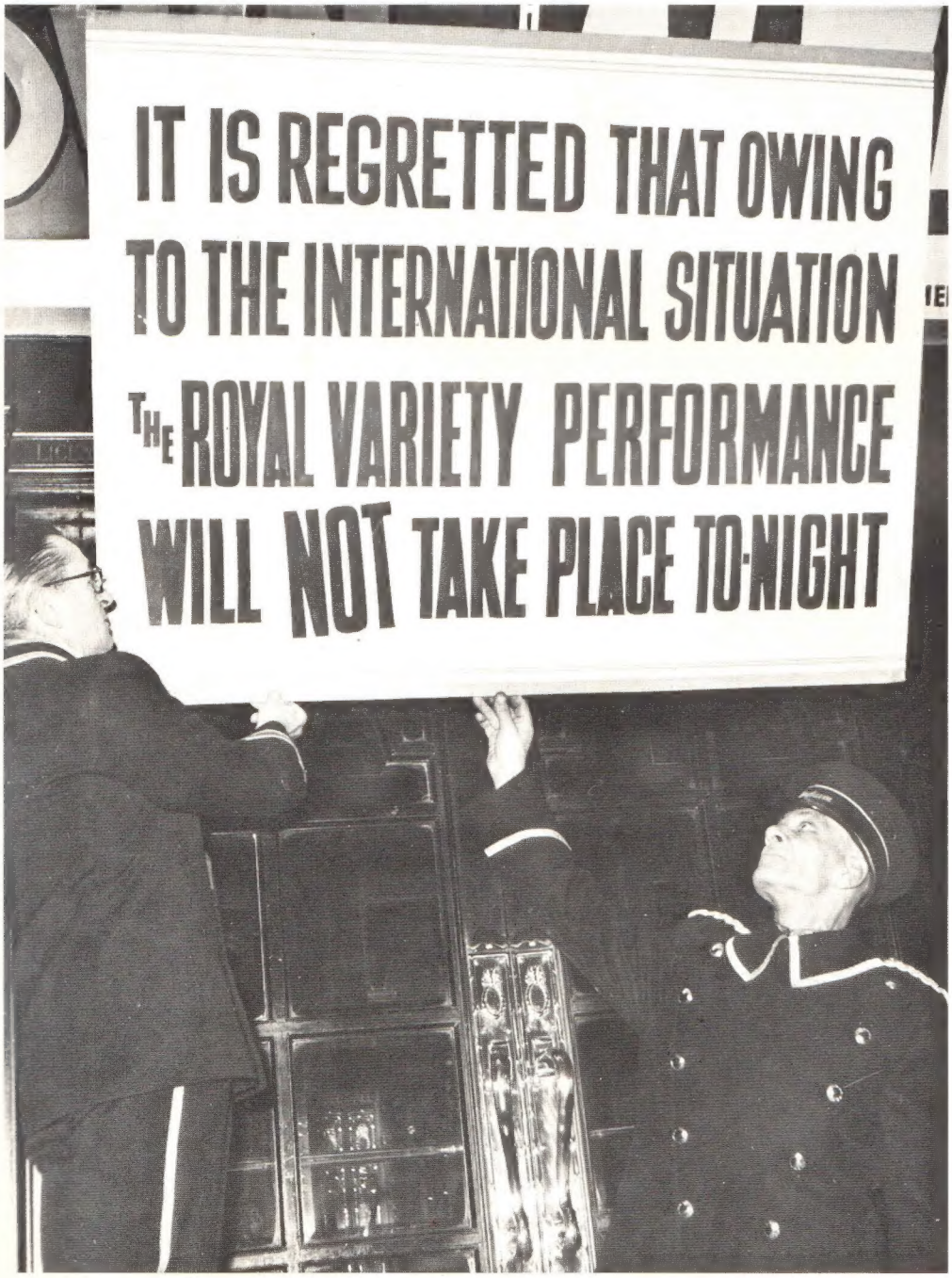
Faced with a drastic run on sterling in addition to the oil crisis, the British government turned with relief to a Canadian proposal to form a U.N. Emergency Force for Suez and on November 6 both Britain and France accepted a ceasefire. The Eden government still hoped to extract concessions from Egypt in return for the withdrawal of British troops. But Eisenhower was adamant; there would be no help with oil supplies until the troops were out. By December 23 they had all been withdrawn.

The Suez affair accomplished precisely the opposite of its intended aims: it strengthened Nasser and was a disastrous failure for Britain. Apart from the false assumption that the Egyptians would be unable to manage the Canal on their own, there had been a major miscalculation in the assumption that the bombing and invasion would turn the people against Nasser. In fact, he subsequently rose to the height of his prestige.

As a consequence of the attack, the 17,000 British subjects in Egypt – British, Maltese and Cypriots, many of whose families had lived there for generations – were expelled; all the still considerable British assets in Egypt were seized; the huge quantities of arms and stores in the Suez Base were confiscated; the hard-won Anglo-Egyptian Agreement of 1954 was cancelled; most of Britain's remaining political and military influence in the Middle East was liquidated; and the destruction, two years later, of Britain's only remaining ally of importance in the Arab world – the Iraq monarchy – was due at least in part to the ill-concealed sympathy of King Feisal for the British invasion of Egypt.

Yet it is almost certain that a British "success" at Suez would in the long term have been even more disastrous. If the Eden government had defied the United Nations and carried on until achieving its objective of overthrowing Nasser, it would have provoked a far more bitter reaction in the Third World and quite probably caused the immediate break-up of the Commonwealth. Moreover, no one had given serious thought to who would replace Nasser in Egypt. Even Eden did not contemplate another British occupation and any régime imposed by Britain would hardly have lasted any more than a few weeks at most.

Suez was the last hunting expedition of the aged British imperial lion. The experience may have been necessary to help the British people through the difficult experience of accepting that they were no longer one of Lord Cromer's Governing Races. When the episode was over the British people as a whole accepted, some of them ruefully and others gladly, that Britain was no longer capable of engaging in an adventure which was opposed by the new Super Powers.



The cancellation of the Variety Club's Royal Command performance emphasized to grim-faced Londoners that Suez was a serious national crisis.

The Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment (50th and 97th Foot), 1895